

Grace

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Genesis 12.1-4a

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In today's lesson from the Book of Genesis, Abraham receives a spectacular promise from God. A promise that God will "bless him. . . and all the people on the face of the earth will be blessed through him." While Abraham has been heralded throughout the centuries for his faithfulness, Abraham was not blessed because of how good and faithful he was; Abraham was blessed because of how good and faithful God is.

I'd like to suggest that Abraham's faithfulness has been exaggerated while his conduct has been minimized. Abraham was a complex man, a man of his time, a man who took full advantage of and even exploited the power and privilege afforded him through his gender and wealth. When we deny or minimize this reality, we turn Abraham into the champion of his story, rather than God.

Abraham was by no means a perfect man. Rather, Abraham was a perfectly imperfect man in need of grace. Abraham's story is about God meeting him where he was at and inviting him to someplace new. This is a story of grace, and it is our story as well.

Our sermon text today comes from the 12th Chapter of Genesis, but Abraham's story actually begins in the 10th chapter with his lineage. As you will hear in just a bit, Abraham disregarded women, he thought of and treated them as less than human. And, this mindset was not unique to Abraham - it was inherited from and shared by his family and community. One example of this inherited, communal mindset is found in Abraham's lineage, which includes the names of 72 men and 0 women. It does not even include the name of Abraham's mother. Though she carried Abraham in her womb, gave birth to and raised him, she was not considered important enough in this patriarchal society to be included in her own son's genealogy. Given Abraham's family history, we should not be surprised by his attitude towards or treatment of women. He was a product of his time and his people, as are we all.

It is not my intention to villainize Abraham. . .

I grew up in a family which prided itself on its racism and in a community that failed to offer me a different perspective. My father in fact instructed me at a young age on the virtues of the Klu Klux Klan. Racial slurs were common place in my home. And disparaging jokes made for good dinner table talk. I understood anyone who did not have my skin color to be less than human. This mindset was not my own – I inherited it from and shared it with my family and community. I was a product of my people and my time. And I was in need of grace.

Grace came to me through a journey, a journey from Northern Wisconsin to Oakland, California where I attended college. I had not been to Oakland, a predominately African-American city, before attending college. I had not visited Oakland and I knew nothing about where I was going. I simply went because I was invited. With this one grace-filled invitation my life began to change. I found myself in situations which illuminated my sin; I was surrounded by people who challenged my attitude and behavior.

God sent Abraham on a journey. God told Abraham to leave his family and his community and to go. Abraham didn't know where he was going. He just knew he was supposed to go so he did. Shortly after he and Sarah, his wife, set out on their divinely inspired journey, they encountered a famine. Their search for food took them to Egypt, where Abraham's own sin was illuminated. Fearful for his safety, Abraham prostituted his wife to Pharaoh who took Sarah as his concubine. Abraham pretended that Sarah was his sister, trading her body and compromising her safety for his own. Abraham was a man in need of grace.

His grace came through a dream. A dream in which God told Pharaoh that Sarah was Abraham's wife, not his sister. Pharaoh awoke from the dream and immediately sent Sarah back to Abraham but not without confronting Abraham, not without challenging him for his behavior.

Learned attitudes and behaviors are very difficult to unlearn. It can take years, if not a lifetime.

Thankfully God does not give up on us. Through grace, God extends us invitation after invitation after invitation to become the person, the people, whom we were created to be.

Despite my great desire to not be racist, I found myself, those first few years of college, automatically reverting to old behaviors and attitudes. I relied heavily on my friends for help. Each time they called me out, each time they challenged me, each time they corrected me, and each time they invited me to see and hear things differently, they were extending me grace – they were helping me to become the person God had created me to be. Eventually I was able to hold myself accountable, to recognize my own racism and to deconstruct and rebuild my attitudes and behaviors. But this did not come quickly or easily – this took time, with lots of failure and embarrassment, but God was patient and persistent.

Abraham had many behaviors and attitudes to unlearn and his unlearning took a lifetime. Many years later Abraham and Sarah found themselves in a situation similar to the one in Egypt. While in this other land, Abraham was fearful for his safety so he prostituted Sarah out to the king, pretending once again that she was his sister. And once again, God intervened. Before the King slept with Sarah he discovered that she was Abraham's wife. He immediately sent her back to Abraham but not without challenging Abraham for his behavior – not without extending him God's grace.

Though this was the last time Abraham sexually exploited Sarah, it was likely not the last time he could have exploited her. If she was beautiful enough to gain the attention of a Pharaoh and a King then she was surely beautiful enough to gain the attention of other men of means. But from this point on in the story, Abraham gives Sarah everything she asks for (even when he shouldn't) and at the end of her life, when Abraham buries her, we are told that he wept. A man does not weep over an object; a man weeps when he loses the woman he loves.

Midway through Abraham's story he becomes a father to Ishmael. Sarah is unable to become pregnant so she offers Hagar, her slave, to Abraham, hoping that through Hagar she will become a mother.

Tragically, Abraham does recognize Hagar as a full person and does not prioritize Hagar's health or well-being or that of the child in her womb. Abraham continues to treat Hagar as property and allows Sarah to abuse Hagar and to abuse her so viciously that Hagar at one point runs away. She eventually returns but she does not stay. After Sarah gives birth to Isaac, she demands that Hagar and Ishmael leave. And Abraham obliges her. Abraham, a man of abundant wealth, sends his son and his son's mother into the wilderness with only a bag of water and a loaf of bread. He sends them off to die. Abraham's behavior is inexcusable; it is shameful.

Given where I grew up and how I was raised, I should not have the family, the friends, the mentor, or the call at the jail that I do. My life is only what it is because of God's grace. I am exceptionally aware of how blessed I am because I remember how horribly I treated some people, people no longer in my life, simply because I understood myself to be superior to them. My sin of racism is inexcusable; it is shameful. Thankfully God is not stopped by sin or shame.

Abraham was not blessed because of how good and faithful he was; Abraham was blessed because of how good and faithful God is. It is precisely because of Abraham's sin and shame that God continued working on Abraham; that God continued to extend Abraham grace.

[Grace is the fabric of our lives. It is woven into every moment of our existence. Often we are unaware of God's grace but sometimes, especially when we view our lives in retrospect we can clearly see God's grace in our lives. Grace is like the seam that binds a fabric, the seam which keeps the fabric of our lives from fraying and unraveling, and which transforms fabric from a piece of material into a finished product. Grace is that seam which transforms us from who we are to who God has intended us to be, that seam which holds us together and forms and fashions us into God's final product.]

My struggle with racism is not over but my struggle with racism has changed. By the grace of God my extended family has been transformed. Ours is now a family rooted in love rather than ignorance, fear and hate. And my service in the jail has expanded my understanding of racism from individual behaviors

to culturally and institutionally embedded practices which advantage some through the systemic exploitation and oppression of others. God continues to extend me grace each time I am confronted with long-ago learned attitudes, each time a man in jail shares his story with me, and each time I am challenged to recognize and examine my privilege and the responsibility I bear because of it.

Racism and sexism and all the other ways we otherize and dehumanize are woven into our daily lives, in ways to which are often blind. But God is not blind. God is fully aware of our behaviors and attitudes and God is patient and God is persistent, continually extending us invitations into a new way of being.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we witness and receive God's perpetual grace, God's ongoing promise to meet us where we are and to take us to where God intends for us to be. The cross of Jesus is planted in the soil of sin and shame and the resurrection of Jesus is our daily invitation to salvation through grace.

The cross illuminates our racism and the resurrection invites us into reconciliation.

The cross illuminates our sexism and the resurrection invites us into partnership.

The cross illuminates our classism and the resurrection invites us into equality.

The cross illuminates our pride and the resurrection invites us into humility.

The cross illuminates our hate and the resurrection invites us into love.

The cross illuminates our shame and the resurrection invites us into freedom.

The cross illuminates our sin and the resurrection is our grace.

Abraham was not blessed because of how good and faithful he was; Abraham was blessed because of how good and faithful God is. His is a story of grace and it is your story, it is our story, as well.